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SPECIAL ISSUE • Families, Relationships and the Environment:
Climate Change, Sustainability and Biodiversity

open space

Changing the narrative in our relationship with consumption

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This paper introduces two interrelated Open Space articles, *Changing the narrative: Measuring progress by measuring what matters to families* and *Places of prosumption: Community gardens putting the 'we' into neighbourhoods*. These articles explore how space can be created that facilitates relationships that do not rely on social and environmentally damaging consumption, and help create space for socially, environmentally and economically sustainable societies.

key words sustainability • consumption • society • government policy • materialism

From 'I' to 'we': Changing the narrative in Scotland's relationship with consumption written for the Common Weal policy think-tank, the authors explored how the dominant meta narrative of individualistic consumption, labelled the narrative of 'I', which is promoted over the socially collective and community oriented 'we' (Black et al, 2015) might be challenged. This work is founded on the perspective that neoliberal economic policies and current marketing and consumption practices encourage 'invidious materialism' where goods and their symbolic value mediate the relationships we have with ourselves, families, friends and the relationship society has with itself (Miller, 2010; Wilson, 2014). Consumption of this type has invaded these relationships and contributed to the social fragmentation and individualism that lie at the heart of the environmental crisis we currently face (Stocker, 2014).

Materialistic consumption and the marketing that encourages it, have been linked with a long list of environmental (Black and Cherrier, 2010) social and personal damage (Badot and Cova, 2008; Simms and Potts, 2012; Stocker, 2014). For example, Wilkie and Moore (2012) highlight the link between high levels of consumption and high levels of dissatisfaction and regret, while Redmond (2005) linked consumption to decreasing quality of life. Marketing has also been accused of being manipulative, partly because of the disparity between the happiness and fulfilment promised by

consumer goods (Hastings and Saren, 2003) and research highlighting how this ‘stuff’ does not make us happy (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Typically, the reaction when examining what to do about this is to put the onus on the consumer to resist buying goods or to in some way reduce their consumption (Connolly and Prothero, 2003). We take a different view. We contend that when one considers the pre-eminence given to our role as consumers by governments, the ubiquity of marketing messages and the sovereignty given to businesses attempting to sell us something (via planning legislation, privatisation and bank regulation), the *choice* to shop for consumer goods is an illusion, and the choice *not to shop* is harder. We argue strongly, therefore, that considering this and the size and scale of the solutions required to avert the ever-advancing environmental crisis, solutions must also come from governments and via increasingly interventionist public policy.

A crucial macro-level policy change required is in how governments measure societal progress, in particular, that we move away from the narrow, economic-focused Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Our first article, ‘Changing the narrative: Measuring progress by measuring what matters to families’, presents Oxfam Scotland’s Humankind Index as an attempt to align what matters to people, families and communities with measurement of societal and national progress. Such ‘Beyond GDP’ (Jackson, 2009) projects are premised on the expectation that broader measures of societal progress will lead to funding allocations and policy decisions that are aligned to achieving these broader conceptualisation of progress.

Further, progress can be made via the language used by governments, as this frames their intentions and their vision of how a country should develop. Over the last 30 years the language of governance in the US and the UK has lauded private ownership over public, consumption over active citizenship, and individual rights over collective rights and responsibilities. Challenging this and consistently using pro-environmental, pro-society, pro-community language will, through desires to maintain consistency between what we say and subsequently do (Abelson, 1968), make it easier to restrict the marketing of personally and socially damaging products and activities.

An area of significant concern is the failure of policy to address the consumption practices that damage our familial, societal and ecological relationships by directly controlling the current marketing practices that sanction the expansion of invidious materialism (Page, 1992; Ger and Belk, 1999). We therefore support calls to control marketing (Schor, 2004; Harris et al, 2009) where it seeks to manipulate those unable to understand its intentions, where it looks to hide its negative influence, and where it supports damage to our environment. This would include a complete ban on targeting children and other vulnerable groups and the sponsorship of sporting, cultural and community groups by socially and personally damaging products such as alcohol and gambling. The amount and size of advertising allowed in civic and shared spaces should be restricted, and product labelling must provide full information on both the resources used in making and using a product and the waste produced. To oversee this we need to move from self-regulation of advertising to a fully co-regulated system. Finally, we need ensure prices fully reflect the price of the pollution created across a product’s life cycle, and this is likely to require an appropriately priced international greenhouse gas (GHG) pollution cap and trading scheme.

We contend that given the appropriate narrative and space from identity-based, symbol-laden marketing practices, families, individuals and society will have more time, energy and resources for other activities that have been shown consistently to make

us happier, healthier and feel more prosperous (Pretty, 2013). In our second article, 'Places of presumption: Community gardens putting the 'we' into neighbourhoods', we examine what these other activities could be, and explore different possible relationships with production, consumption and community experienced by people participating in community gardens.

Note

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